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ABSTRACT

This study investigated reasons for college choice as detected by the American College Testing (ACT) Corporation's "ACT Alumni Survey." The data were compiled between January 1980 and May 1988 from 172 colleges and universities throughout 42 states, with 77,361 alumni responding. Responses indicated significant differences in the reasons given by persons who chose religious colleges compared to those who had attended public institutions. These differences remained even when religious colleges were compared to public colleges and to private nonreligious colleges of comparable size. The differences included a larger parental influence in choosing a religious college and the perceived importance of social atmosphere. Location was found to be less important for religious schools than for either public or other private colleges. In addition, the survey detected distinct differences as to why people choose religious colleges of different sizes, such as differences in social atmosphere and types of programs available. Includes 26 references. (JDD)

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GRADUATES' REASONS FOR CHOOSING TO ATTEND RELIGIOUS AND PUBLIC COLLEGES

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Abstract

This study investigated reasons for college choice as detected by the ACT Alumni Survey. The ACT data were compiled from 172 colleges and universities throughout 42 states, with over 77,000 alumni responding. Responses indicated significant differences in the reasons given by persons who chose religious colleges compared to those who had attended public institutions. These differences remained even when religious colleges were compared to public colleges and to private nonreligious colleges of comparable size. The differences included a larger parental influence in choosing a religious college, and the perceived importance of social atmosphere. In addition, the survey detected distinct differences as to why people choose religious colleges of different sizes. Implications of these differences for admissions and administrative offers are discussed.

Introduction

Harvard University, the first institution of higher education in America, was established in 1636 (Morison, 1935). Although it was patterned after Cambridge and Oxford, Harvard had a stronger basis in Puritan theology. Its founders believed the church would require educated clergy and, of course, that the country needed competent legislative leaders. Yale, Princeton, Dartmouth, and the College of Rhode Island soon followed the religious awakening (Rudolph, 1962).

The American Revolution of 1776 was a turning point in higher education as well as in the political and social arenas. King's College announced prior to the American Revolution that it would offer a course of study emphasizing navigation, geography, and knowledge of anything "useful for the comfort, convenience, and elegance of life" (Snow, 1907). Between the time of the Revolution and 1802, state legislatures established 19 colleges and ushered in a rivalry among both religious and public colleges (Tewksbury, 1932).

Public higher education has grown so that recently more than 77% of all college students attended public institutions (Snyder, 1987), consuming an ever larger share of the higher educational market. Although this growth occurred as a part of the American culture and reflected the increased importance it placed on higher education, it has also ushered in a new movement towards institutional accountability for student learning (Jacobi, Astin, & Ayala, 1987). Religious colleges have not escaped this emphasis on accountability, and new measures of student changes during college are constantly being developed (Kuh, 1981).

Enrollment Concerns

Colleges and universities are concerned with enrollment and student retention for many reasons, for example, shifts in our economy and a drop in the birth rate have resulted in fewer potential college students (Hossler, 1984). Enrollment management has become a common concept, and research in this area is enjoying new popularity (Ingersoll, 1988). Most colleges now obtain information from new students, parents, and alumni concerning factors influencing their enrollment (Kellaris & Kellaris, 1988).

The programs, policies, and environment of religious colleges tend to differ substantially from these in public colleges (Chickering, 1971). Our study was designed to determine whether students differ regarding why they choose to attend religious and public colleges. Although many such differences have theoretical explanations, our primary focus in this paper is to describe these differences and discuss a few of their implications with respect to increasing enrollment in religious colleges.

Models of College Choice

In the last decade several models of student college choice have been proposed. In his model, Chapman (1981) suggests that four internal student factors influence a student's general expectation of college life: (1) socioeconomic status, (2) aptitude, (3) educational aspiration, and (4) high school performance. Stern (1970) described this expectation as the "freshman myth". In addition, Chapman notes three types of external factors that influence a student's expectation: (1) significant persons (including parents), (2) fixed college characteristics, and (3) college efforts to communicate with students. According to Chapman, this generalized expectation,

along with a student's perception of a college (based on the information that he/she is provided), forms the basis of the college choice.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) developed a three-phase model. Phase one, predisposition, occurs when factors such as a student's educational activities and significant others influence the decision to attend college or to seek other options. During phase two, search, a student studies the information available and arrives at a "choice set" of colleges. During the final phase, the college choice, the student's choice set and the "courtship" activities of schools influence the final decision.

The ACT Alumni Survey

Few studies of college choice have been conducted, in part because such data is hard to collect (Chapman, 1981). One way to study this decision, however, is through questioning alumni. One outcome measure, developed by the American College Testing Corporation and marketed beginning in 1980, is the ACT Alumni Survey. The survey consisted of multiple-choice questions designed to help colleges and universities assess their graduates and assist them in planning. The four major sections of the survey included questions on college experiences and outcomes, continuing education, employment history, and demographic information. The instrument takes about 20-25 minutes to complete.

The ACT Alumni Survey is one of nine instruments developed by ACT to be utilized at the post-secondary level. According to a review in the Ninth Mental Measurements Yearbook (Hartnett, 1985), the survey is an excellent example of the nonadmissions tests available to colleges and universities. The instrument is primarily designed to provide group-based information to schools

and colleges, evaluate the effects of college, and to collect background data on college alumni (Hartnett, 1985). A brief review of recent research on alumni showed that at least seven studies have utilized the instrument (Graham, 1986; Higgins, 1983; Valiga, 1982; Jones, 1981).

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected between January, 1980 and May, 1988 at 172 colleges and universities throughout 42 states. The participating institutions had utilized the ACT research services during the 8-year period and were not randomly selected. However, they could be considered representative of those who utilize the services according to ACT officials familiar with these data (Valiga, personal communication, June 24, 1988). The institutions involved represented both public and private institutions of various types from across the country.

The institutions mailed the survey to a sample of their recent alumni and the completed forms were returned to ACT for scoring and evaluation. The median response rate was approximately 36%, with many schools obtaining considerably higher rates. During this time 77,361 surveys were completed and comprised the original subject pool for this study.

Only alumni who indicated that their highest degree was a bachelor's were included in the analysis. Graduates of community and 2-year colleges, as well as graduate programs, were excluded. To isolate the difference between public and religious colleges, two steps were taken. First, since many of these differences could be due to the distinction between private and public, a third group, private nonreligious colleges, was also studied. Classification as public, private nonreligious or private-

religious was determined by the institutions themselves, not by the ACT or by the researchers.

Alternatively, the differences in reasons for attending public and religious colleges could be attributable to variation in size between the two types of schools. To avoid this, the alumni in each of the three categories were also grouped according to the size of the college attended. Size groupings were adapted from those already established by the United States Department of Education in their annual Digest of Educational Statistics (Snyder, 1987).

Sample

Approximately 90% of the respondents were between the ages of 21-39 with the largest group (57%) falling between 23-29. About two-thirds had graduated within the 4 years prior to completion of the survey, though 60% had been out 3 years or more. The subjects represented a variety of academic majors, with the greatest numbers having completed majors in business (19.4%), education (19.4), health professions (12.1%), social sciences (12.5%) and communications-related areas (9.0%). The rest represented other areas such as physical and biological sciences, engineering and computer science, fine arts, and community services. Approximately 90% of the respondents had been enrolled full-time; 63% were female.

Results

Responses to the question, "What was your primary reason for attending this college?", see table 1, showed that individuals chose religious and public institutions for different reasons.

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insert table 1 about here

The data indicate that although size may not always be the most important factor, its indirect effect through its influence on other reasons is unquestionable.

Differences within Size Classifications

Although the influence of parents varied greatly among various institutional sizes, the advice of parents or relatives was clearly more important for those who had attended religious schools than the other two types. Whereas academic reputation was much more important to alumni of private schools with enrollments of less than 500, it became more important for those who had attended religious schools when enrollment was between 2,500 and 5,000 students. As expected, size and location were both more important for public schools than for either types of private school, regardless of size. It is interesting to note, however, that for schools in the largest classification studied, (10,000-20,000 students), location was relevant for choosing private nonreligious schools (40.4%) but remained low for choice of private-religious institutions (12.1%).

Another difference within the size classifications concerned the types of academic programs available. For schools of most sizes, this reason was much more important for private nonreligious schools than for the other two types. The exceptions were schools with enrollments of fewer than 500 students in which the importance of programs available was essentially the same for all three types of schools, and for schools with enrollments between 5,000 and 10,000 students, where this reason was also extremely important for both private religious (77.0%) and private non-religious (76.1%). This is probably due to the fact that certain specialized programs, such as engineering, are available only at larger colleges, whether public or private.

Differences between Size Classifications

In addition to variation in reasons for choosing to attend different types of educational institutions, there were also significant differences in the reasons alumni reported for choosing colleges of differing sizes, even within the same type of institution. For example, the type of program available is very important for religious colleges with less than 500 students and between 5,000 and 10,000 students, yet only moderately important in the selection of religious schools of other sizes.

Another difference among religious schools had to do with size, which was a significant reason for choosing to attend all classifications of schools expect for those with enrollments between 5,000 and 10,000. Differences in social atmosphere given as the main reason for their choice were found among the various size classifications. Size and social atmosphere appear to be highly correlated statistically and probably conceptually as well. This is due to the fact that, for many, the main reason for choosing a particular size may be for the social atmosphere which accompanies it.

For private colleges, the main difference between sizes appear to involve academic reputation and location. Academic reputation is very important only for smaller schools (enrollments less than 500), while location seems to fluctuate greatly but with no apparent pattern. For public schools, the major difference between size classifications involved the type of program available.

Other Differences

Another interesting difference that did not fit in either of the categories discussed above has to do with colleges with between 5,000 and 10,000 students. The reasons for selecting

colleges of this size are clearly different from those given for attending schools of other sizes. It is if this in-between size has a unique set of reasons for why individuals choose a college of this size, distinct from all the other size classifications, regardless of the type of institution.

Discussion

One of the seeming advantages of doing statistical analyses with large samples is the ease with which statistical significance can be achieved. Although all of the differences we describe are statistically significant, some are undoubtably random, with little practical significance. Others, however, are not random and can be explained by theory.

According to Reynolds (1981, p.27), "In its broadest sense college selection can be viewed as a partnership of choice in which the parent and the child must negotiate an agreement." Parents appear to enter the process early (Reynolds, 1981) and probably have their greatest influence during the selection of the "choice set" (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Most parents carry "veto power" over the selection of a college (Murphy, 1981; Reynolds, 1981).

As other researchers have found, compared to students who attend nonreligious institutions, students who attend church-related colleges do so more because of influences from parents and relatives (Kellaris & Kellaris, 1988; MacDermott, Conn, & Owen, 1985; Riesman, 1980). Christian parents influence their children either because they attended a particular Christian college or have ties to the sponsoring denomination (Riesman, 1980). Many students are looking for a safe, moral atmosphere (Tierney, 1988) or want to avoid secular, cosmopolitan institutions (Riesman, 1980).

Finally, regarding parents, research shows that most parents rely on a variety of sources for their information about colleges (Reynolds, 1981; Smith and Bers, 1989). Moreover, a recent poll found that only half of the parents and students surveyed felt they had adequate facts to make an informed judgement regarding college choice (Carnegie Foundation, 1986).

The research reported in this paper indicates that religious colleges should do more to communicate with parents, in particular, to provide them information early in their child's process of deciding if and where to attend college. Second, since parents utilize other parents as their most reliable source (Reynolds, 1981), parent programs could increase enrollment both directly and indirectly. Third, although it was not explicit in our data, one could infer that children of alumni would be an especially attractive market for religious colleges. As Murphy (1981, p.148), suggests "alumni should be encouraged to bring their grade-school-age children with them whey they return to campus."

Besides more emphasis on parents, our data imply that religious colleges need to market their distinctiveness from public colleges, especially regarding social atmosphere. This would seem to be an area where religious colleges should be able to set themselves apart, even from public colleges of similar size and with similar programs.

Finally our study shows that for a college of almost any size, location was less important for religious schools than for either public or other private colleges. This indicates that religious colleges should emphasize factors other than location and perhaps seek students from a larger geographical area.

Conclusion

Our data clearly show that individuals do not choose to attend religious and public colleges for the same reasons. Alumni from religious colleges revealed that their parents, as well as the college's social atmosphere, were more influential in their choice of a college than did alumni of other types of schools. Our data also show that these differences cannot be attributed to variation between public and private schools alone nor to differences in schools size. Thus, those who are interested in maintaining or increasing enrollment in religious colleges need to keep these differences in mind when they recruit students and promote their schools.

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Table 1

Percentage responses to item F, "What was your primary reason for attending this college?", by size and type of college.

Reason	Size: Less than 500			Size: 500 - 1000			Size: 1000 - 2500			Size: 2500 - 5000			Size: 5000 - 10000			Size: 10000 - 20000		
	Rel.	Priv.	Pub.	Rel.	Priv.	Pub.	Rel.	Priv.	Pub.	Rel.	Priv.	Pub.	Rel.	Priv.	Pub.	Rel.	Priv.	Pub.
Cost	0.8	0.0	6.4	1.5	0.7	19.5	1.5	3.1	6.3	0.0	2.0	12.5	0.8	1.1	12.6	2.4	0.4	9.0
Adm. Standards	1.7	2.3	1.1	2.9	0.7	0.4	2.4	1.0	1.8	0.5	5.7	1.4	3.9	0.8	1.4	1.9	1.5	1.3
Size	5.3	5.1	0.5	12.8	3.4	4.6	11.2	7.9	6.1	15.1	10.6	5.0	1.0	0.2	5.4	9.5	0.4	4.2
Social Atmosphere	2.9	0.0	0.5	5.2	4.8	0.4	7.1	2.3	1.7	8.6	0.4	0.9	0.4	0.8	1.9	6.3	0.4	1.0
Location	11.5	15.4	35.1	19.3	5.8	34.2	15.8	26.7	37.9	6.7	9.8	46.8	2.6	4.1	35.3	12.1	40.4	36.2
Type of Prog. Avail.	44.2	32.6	41.0	20.0	64.8	19.3	19.1	24.8	11.5	17.2	43.7	18.0	77.0	76.1	20.1	24.8	41.9	29.8
Acad. Reputation	4.9	34.4	9.0	6.6	5.9	8.0	10.9	8.2	6.9	21.0	7.8	4.0	3.5	9.0	7.0	13.8	6.2	6.8
Avail. of Scholar-ships/financial aid	3.7	8.9	6.7	7.9	3.0	5.4	6.1	8.5	11.0	11.3	2.9	2.1	2.1	0.0	3.4	12.2	4.2	2.6
Advice of parents or relatives	7.2	3.7	0.5	10.2	1.8	3.8	12.2	6.4	8.0	10.2	4.9	3.1	1.1	0.5	4.1	9.1	1.5	3.6
Advice of high school personnel	0.1	0.0	0.0	1.5	1.7	0.8	2.0	2.3	1.2	0.5	0.0	1.0	0.4	2.2	1.6	1.3	0.0	0.8
To be with friends	0.3	0.5	0.5	1.2	0.5	0.4	2.2	2.0	1.3	1.1	0.0	1.3	0.3	0.8	2.1	0.8	0.0	2.0
Other	17.3	4.2	3.7	11.0	7.0	3.4	9.7	6.4	6.3	7.5	12.2	3.9	7.1	4.4	4.2	5.8	3.1	2.7
N	1032	215	188	2576	878	503	8888	709	1214	186	245	5542	1128	368	18083	843	260	3307